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ONE

Thinking about Political Inequality

In 2013, the Birmingham, Alabama suburb of Gardendale began the process of disassociating itself from the Jefferson County school district, of which it had been a part. Residents did so in order to form their own school district, comprised only of students who live within the town boundary. Officials of Gardendale (which is 88 percent white and has a median income roughly twice that of the state average) voted to raise property taxes to finance development of this new district—which they expect will offer educational opportunities far more enriching than those provided by the Jefferson County schools (where more than half of the students enrolled qualify for federal free or reduced lunch subsidies). Gardendale's efforts are part of what the *Nation* (2014) refers to as a "new secessionist movement," in which wealthy towns or communities (largely, but by no means exclusively, in the South) within larger, mixed-income school districts vote to establish their own, well-funded, districts.

Many of these sorts of efforts have occurred in Alabama, where funding inequities across high- and low-income districts are among the greatest in the country. With very little state revenue earmarked to compensate for the low property tax bases of economically struggling areas, Alabama's high-poverty districts receive, on average, nearly $1,000 less per pupil than do its districts with very little poverty (Baker, Sciarra, and Farrie 2015). Alabama's aggregate performance on standard educational metrics has been improving in recent years, but its low-income students still achieve at rates well below the national average (Annie Casey Foundation 2014). Though the state has commissioned a study to determine whether there are ways

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to target additional resources to high-poverty districts, or districts with large numbers of at-risk students, large-scale efforts to do so would almost certainly require an amendment to the state Constitution (Lyman 2014).

Minnesota, meanwhile, has been moving in the other direction. In 2013, the state legislature approved several changes in state law that are designed to funnel additional state resources to low-income districts. Such "Location Equity Revenue" (Walseth 2013) is meant to compensate for both the challenges of educating academically disadvantaged students and for the lower revenue bases of lower-income districts. It adds to an already progressive school funding formula that, on average, provides high-poverty districts roughly 30 percent more per pupil than low-poverty ones. The educational performance of Minnesota's low-income students—while still lagging well behind that of their high-income peers—ranks among the best in the country (Annie Casey Foundation 2014).

The politics behind these stories are complex: embedded in them are views on ideology, history and tradition, the value of education, and myriad other things. Given where they took place, they also say something about the enduring importance of race in American politics.[1] But they are also a story of how different areas of the United States have responded to the country's growing divergence of incomes. As Piketty and Saez (2014) and many others have shown, nearly all economic gains over the past half century have been captured by a fairly small slice of the population. As a result, income and wealth in the United States are as unequally distributed as they have been in nearly a century. This inequality is in many ways the defining story of American politics over the past several decades, one President Barack Obama has called the "defining challenge of our time."

But while income inequality has increased nationally, the ways in which citizens experience it is not the same everywhere. Poor children in both Alabama and Minnesota face challenges. For some, these challenges are exacerbated by race, family status, or other factors. But the context in which they live matters, too. All else equal, poor children—or wealthy children—growing up in certain areas have different experiences, and different opportunities, than others. These differences are not just limited to educational experience. Wealthier people, on average, enjoy greater social and community resources, and closer ties to the policy-making processes that affect them, than do the poor. But the contexts in which they live also say a great deal about the environments in which they are socialized, the opportunities and resources that they are offered, the milieu in which their civic and political discourse happens, and the ways in which they interact with their political and economic officials. Class matters in the United

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States. But the ways in which it matters for both civic participation, and political representation, depends on the context in which it is experienced.

Inequality and American Democracy

This is a book about class politics in the United States. More to the point, it is a book about inequality in political power across income lines. Income inequality is, by essentially any measure, rising. There are also similar divergences in economic security and opportunity: wealthy citizens have become not only wealthier but also more insulated from market risk and job instability relative to the poor (Hacker 2006). Social mobility—the ability to move up or down on the income spectrum over the course of one's lifetime—has declined as well (Aaronsen and Mazumder 2008). Even increases in life span over the past 50 years have been enjoyed only by those in the top portion of the income distribution (Cohen, Preston, and Crimmins 2011).

While these facts in and of themselves may be cause for alarm, political science has made a strong case that economic inequality also is strongly connected to inequalities in political voice. Rising economic inequality, in other words, is largely a political construct, both a function of and a cause of a political system that allows people to use their economic means to get what they want from democratic processes. The notion that the health of a democracy could be jeopardized by the relationship between money and political power is, of course, not a new concern. And so long as political participation (and more broadly, freedom of speech) remains voluntary and relatively unregulated, wealthier people will have advantages in the political processes that the poor do not share. Political participation is a resource-based activity, and wealthy citizens generally have more political resources than the poor (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

But the notion that growing economic inequality may translate to significant disparities in political influence is a troubling phenomenon, given that a key virtue of successful democratic systems is their ability to largely separate economic power from political power (Walzer 1983). The equal consideration of all citizens is, as Verba (2003) states, "one of the bedrock principles in a democracy." A flurry of recent research has empirically investigated the connections between economic inequality and political influence, and the findings have been troubling. We have learned that inequality leads to a lower sense of political efficacy among the poor (Uslaner and Brown 2005), and a greater ability for wealthy people to set the political

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agenda and draft candidates that they prefer (Hacker and Pierson 2011). Some have also posited that economic inequalities have exacerbated differences in political engagement and participation (e.g., Solt 2008).

Most problematically, we have seen evidence that the political system privileges the interests of the wealthy over the poor (e.g., Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Flavin 2012; Ellis 2013). When policymakers have a choice to represent the views of the poor or the views of the wealthy, they by and large choose the views of the wealthy. The result is that rising inequality—abetted, to be sure, by other structural changes in global economic and technological forces—is not only tolerated but exacerbated by a political system that ignores the interests of the poor.

Inequalities in policy representation, in other words, seem to be the norm rather than the exception. And despite all this, lower-income citizens have generally not responded to growing inequality with stronger and louder demands for redistribution. Even though the United States has higher levels of inequality than nearly every other established democracy, Americans generally have lower levels of class consciousness than most other nations (Lipset and Marks 2000). On many major policy issues, the views of wealthy and poor citizens are more similar than they are different. By many accounts, this lack of class consciousness is born from the simple notion that citizens are either unable or unwilling to connect their preferences with the policies that are best for their own needs and values (Frank 2005; Bartels 2008). And at least according to some measures, high levels of inequality seems to *decrease* demands for redistribution—perhaps especially among wealthy citizens (who might be thought to benefit from such inequality) but also from the poor as well (Enns et al. 2014). The aggregate picture, one might surmise from this work, is bleak: one where "oligarchy" (Winters and Page 2009) reigns, the wealthy have significant power to turn their economic self-interest into established public policy, and ordinary citizens are too powerless or too disengaged to do anything about it.

But the story of income inequality and political influence is more complicated than this. There are some contexts—both in the United States and elsewhere—in which lower-income people have mobilized to be a potent political force (Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Jackson, Brown, and Wright 1998), or where laws exist to enhance the political clout of the poor (Flavin 2015a). There are places where a robust political discussion revolving around class and redistribution exists, or where wealthy and poor citizens seem to be responding rationally to changes in the political environment around them (Soroka and Wlezien 2008). And

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there are contexts in which lower-income citizens do get what they want from elected officials (Ellis 2013; Rigby and Wright 2013). While political inequality seems to be the norm in American politics, it is far from clear that it is a universal, or at all necessary, outgrowth of the country's basic political and economic systems.

For reasons both theoretical (what do we know about how citizens and legislators think and behave in an era of rising inequality?) and substantive (if political inequality is a problem, how might we go about fixing it?), it is important to understand exactly how class divisions manifest themselves in political outcomes, and what factors serve to enhance, or depress, inequalities in political voice. This book takes a step in that direction, by focusing attention on the ways in which citizens and legislators actually experience inequality in their daily lives.

National Inequality, Local Experiences

Income inequality is a national issue with national consequences. But we know that citizens are largely unaware or uninterested in these sorts of national trends (Lawrence and Sides 2014). And even for citizens who are aware of them, the economic inequalities and class divisions that are reflected in national statistics may be a poor reflection on the ways in which these factors manifest themselves in citizens' regular experiences. Some communities are more equal than others. Some are wealthier than others. Some provide more educational and social resources than others. Some are more economically segregated than others, while some provide more opportunities to see and interact with different sorts of people than others.

The general argument in this book is that it is these sorts of local factors that provide a basis for how citizens—and legislators—connect income inequality to their attitudes and behaviors. Thinking about "rising inequality" solely as a national phenomenon misses a good deal about how that inequality is experienced and lived in diverse ways in diverse types of communities. As a result, while inequality is increasing more or less everywhere, the way that that inequality—and class politics more generally—manifests itself in political behavior will differ in predictable and meaningful ways based on political context.

The main point of what is to come is simple: citizens'—and legislators'—view of class politics is not driven by abstract statistics or aggregate trends,

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but by lived experience in particular communities. Whether or not "all politics is local," it stands to reason that the ways in which citizens think about inequality, and about their class position more generally, is driven by the immediate environment in which those things are experienced.

Citizens learn much that can inform their views about their own economic position and class politics more generally from the context in which they live. Some of these experiences are formally political, or the result of political processes—debates between friends, neighbors, or local politicians regarding property tax rates or public assistance, or the educational and communal resources to which citizens have access. But most of them are not. In the course of regular interactions with people and environments, citizens learn a great deal about their own position in the broader socioeconomic spectrum, and about the social norms that govern how class intersects with day-to-day life. Are the people around me mostly richer than me, or mostly poorer than me? Do I regularly interact with people who look different from me, or not? Are these interactions, in the main, positive or negative? Do I receive messages—through the media, or through conservations with friends and acquaintances—that the poor are lazy or responsible for their own fate, or that the wealthy are simple beneficiaries of luck and circumstance? Do people like me care about politics? Are they politically active? Do they feel as if they can make a difference? Does it appear that people like me have a real chance to get ahead in life? These sorts of interactions—what Baybeck and McClurg (2005) call the "slow drip of everyday life"—are integral in shaping how citizens think about class, inequality, and political life.

To a great extent, the same sorts of contextual factors are important for policymakers, too. Broader changes in the political and economic climate may be increasing the pressures for policymakers of all stripes to cater more strongly to the interests of the wealthy. But most legislators do not represent "the public" at large, nor are they ultimately accountable to the interests of specific pressure groups. Rather, they represent specific constituencies within particular geographic areas. We know that legislators do not see their constituencies as a simple undifferentiated mass, but as a number of separate subconstituencies, each with different views, motivations, and usefulness to the legislator's career and policy goals (Fenno 1978). The composition of these subconstituencies, their relative power and numbers, and the political resources at their disposal, vary in substantial ways across areas of the country. These factors, in turn, affect who policymakers hear from and, in turn, who they represent (Miler 2010).

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Context and Class Politics

In the book, I develop a general model of how local context affects class politics in the United States. I use it to explore two central questions. First, how does context affect the way in which rich and poor make sense of political life? Second, how does context affect how rich and poor are represented by policymakers?

Most theoretical discussions and empirical models in this book seek to explain the choices of individuals, whether ordinary citizens or legislators. What factors affect whether a citizen is likely to vote? Or to hold "liberal" or "conservative" views on redistributive issues? What factors affect how well, or how equally, a legislator represents his or her constituents? There is a rich tradition of scholarship of the sort under consideration here, studying the behavior of both public opinion and legislator choice with respect to these sorts of questions from an individual-level, micro perspective.

But following from the excellent work of Robert Huckfeldt, this book argues that "political opinions and behavior of individuals cannot be explained apart from the environments in which they occur" (1986, 1). With that perspective in mind, the book will work to understand how income's role in political processes—in shaping both how citizens think and act, and how legislators represent their constituents—is affected by the contexts in which citizens and legislators act and interact.

The book will focus on U.S. congressional districts as the contextual unit of interest. As I outline in more detail in chapter 2, congressional districts are assumed to be formal political boundaries that provide a useful, if imperfect, approximation of the context in which citizens experience political life. They also serve as a critical nexus of representation between citizens and the federal government. Finally, their geographical, socioeconomic, and demographic composition varies starkly across areas of the country. They thus provide a uniquely valuable way to understand contextual differences in both public opinion and representation.

The rest of the book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews what we know about the role of contextual factors in political choices, and introduces a general model of how context affects the landscape of class politics in the United States. This model builds from and integrates insights from many different disciplines to understand the contextual factors—both formal and informal—that shape how both citizens and legislators think and act. The rest of the book works to apply aspects of this model to issues pertinent to the study of class politics and political inequality in the United States.

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Chapter 3 and 4 explore the role of context in shaping the behavior of ordinary citizens. Chapter 3 addresses the issue of equality in political participation. We know that wealthier citizens participate in politics at greater rates than poorer ones: political participation is a resource-based activity, and wealthier individuals generally possess more political resources than poorer ones. But particularly for the poor, the ways these resources are developed and translated into politically meaningful activity is affected by both informal (e.g., social norms) and formal (e.g., institutional structures and laws) attributes of the areas in which citizens live.

Chapter 4 deals with class differences in public opinion. Building from chapter 2, this chapter offers a model of "activated class awareness" that works to understand where we should expect opinions on political issues to divide strongly along class lines, and where the opinions of rich and poor should remain roughly similar to one another.

Chapters 5 through 8 turn to the issue of political representation. Chapter 5 outlines the concept of "dyadic representation," and makes the case that inequalities in political representation are real and significant. Importantly, it also makes the case that simple aggregate explanations for why inequalities across income lines persist—that wealthy people donate and vote more than the poor, or are more likely to belong to privileged demographic groups—tell only a limited part of the story.

Chapter 6 explores the impact of contextual factors on representational equality, showing that a persistent representational bias in the aggregate masks significant differences in representational inequality across congressional districts, and arguing that these differences can be explained by differences in how visible, and how relevant, poor citizens are to their representatives. Chapter 7 turns the focus to representational inequality over time, highlighting the fact that many of the contextual factors that we would expect to increase the size of the representational gap between rich and poor are becoming more prominent over time. Accordingly, representational inequality is growing over time as well. Finally, chapter 8 offers some broader analyses of democratic accountability and representation, and offers some ways to use what we have learned to think about remediating political inequality.

The implications of the findings are diverse, and the effects of context on behavior are not always linear or straightforward. But the general message is simple: contextual factors—in particular, the resources that a community offers to its lower-income citizens, and the visibility that such citizens have to their elected representatives—can serve either to enhance

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the political voice of the poor or to take it away. Political inequality exists in the aggregate, but it does not exist everywhere. It is, rather, a function of specific contextual arrangements that serve to depress the political influence of the poor. Identifying and understanding these factors is a crucial step in thinking about what sorts of reforms might be especially helpful in enhancing equality of political voice.

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